The danse macabre*: the fiction of J.P. Donleavy and Henry Miller*

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Abstract: *The work of two writers, J.P. Donleavy and Henry Miller is compared. It is argued that the anarchic behaviour of the characters in the fiction of both writers is in defiance of the void they perceive to be at the centre of things, an exuberance in the face of death, a* danse macabre.

> It may be that we are doomed, that there is no hope for us, *any of us*, but if that is so then let us set up a last agonizing, bloodcurdling howl, a screech of defiance, a war whoop! Away with lamentation! Away with elegies and dirges! Away with biographies and histories, and libraries and museums! Let the dead eat the dead. Let us living ones dance about the rim of the crater, a last expiring dance. But a dance!
>
> H. Müller *Tropic of Cancer*, 258

J.P. Donleavy (b. New York, 1926) has written thirteen novels and novellas, in addition to short stories, plays and non-fiction. His most recent novel is *Wrong Information is Being Given Out at Princeton* (1998) and yet, with the author celebrating his eightieth birthday in 2006, attention continues to be primarily focused upon his first novel, *The Ginger Man* (Paris 1955). His own Internet site rather encourages this emphasis, including the results of two surveys that highlight the novel: Modern Library's "Top 100 novels of the 20th century", in which *The Ginger Man* is listed at 99th position, and a survey compiled from Irish booksellers' records gathered since 1930, in which the novel is ranked at Number 7 in the "Top 100 Books in Ireland"[1]. Given that Donleavy's fame continues to rest principally on his first novel his eightieth birthday provides us with a useful opportunity to revisit his early writing.

F.R. Karl places Donleavy amongst the "Angry Young Men" of the 1950s:

> From Amis's famous Jim Dixon to Donleavy's less well-known Sebastian Dangerfield (*The Ginger Man*, 1958), the heroes of these novelists are angry at hypocrisy, sham, and class restrictions; they do not, however, seek to put the

> world right but adapt themselves to those aspects of existence they can tolerate. (Karl 8)

Gerald Weales echoes this categorisation, while arguing that it is not wholly accurate:

> The introduction of Amis and Osborne into a discussion of Donleavy is misleading as well as helpful. It does indicate the likenesses among them, the way in which Donleavy is part of a literary pattern – an English rather than an American one. (Weale 151)

Although Donleavy is indeed part of a pattern, I shall argue that it is in fact an American one, that Donleavy's early fiction is much more closely allied to that of Henry Miller than to that of Kingsley Amis, that, as Kingsley Widmer believes, "... *The Ginger Man* belongs to the *Tropic of Cancer* tradition of wild nihilistic humour." (Widmer 157). Nihilism is central to Donleavy's vision; the humour and the wildness of the fiction result from the awareness of the characters that their very existence is but a transitory fleck in the great void, the desolation, the silence. To take up Henry Miller's metaphor, they are dancing on the "rim of the crater", and, if the dance slackens just slightly, the enormity of their isolation and sadness will beset them with agonising intensity.

The Ginger Man is a novel that is bubbling over with vitality. It has great affinities with *Tropic of Cancer* (listed at 50th position in the Modern Library survey), and one of the most significant is that, like Henry Miller's novel, it symbolises the predicament of man confronting the void in its casting of the central character as an exiled American living in Europe. Henry Miller writes:

> It seems as if my own proper existence had come to an end somewhere, just where exactly I can't make out. I'm not an American any more, nor a New Yorker, and even less a European, or a Parisian. I haven't any allegiance, any responsibilities, any hatreds, any worries, any prejudices, any passion. I'm neither for nor against. I'm a neutral. (Miller, *TC* 157.)

This is precisely the position of Dangerfield in Dublin, except that he is too much of an agent ever to be considered strictly neutral. Kingsley Widmer describes the position of the exiled American in Europe thus:

> … the American separates himself and asserts a positive nihilism, a mocking individuality, and a joyous isolation in refusing to play the traditional "civilised" game. (Widmer 67)

Dangerfield has no acknowledged affiliations and he is thus in a position to see the desolation and the absurdity of both America and Ireland; it is almost a metaphysical

position. He is the 'gingerbread man' of the nursery rhyme who can never be still, who exists in a state of constant flight; he is perpetually vulnerable since his freedom will more easily be trammelled as soon as he stops to rest (it is from this characteristic that the picaresque nature of the novel necessarily arises). Dangerfield is also an angry man; the Clown in *Twelfth Night* (1599) is well-known for his retort "… ginger shall be hot i' the mouth" (II.iii.119), which aptly describes Dangerfield's behaviour whenever he feels that his freedom is at risk or when he senses that circumstances are conspiring against him. The restlessness and the violence are fundamental elements of his psyche.

The character in the novel that feels the brunt of these elements is, of course, Dangerfield's wife, Marion. She is a well brought-up English girl who represents the opposite end of the pole at whose tip Sebastian cavorts. He says of her:

> She's always airing the house. Opening up the windows at every little fart. Tells me she never farts. At least mine come out with a bang. (Donleavy, *GM* 30)

Her inhibitions, which she tries to extend in order to repress Sebastian, are anathema to his anarchic rebelliousness:

> … I come down martyred and mussed, feeble and fussed, heart and soul covered in cement. (Donleavy, *GM* 49)

and he reacts against her and the restrictions of his marriage with violence. Like a caged animal he turns on his keeper and anybody else whom he associates with his plight; he beats up his wife, and attempts to suffocate his screaming baby daughter, Felicity. He also steals his daughter's milk money to spend on alcohol – she develops rickets through her malnutrition. But, for all his anarchy, Dangerfield is not completely amoral; he has enough of a moral sense to be afflicted by guilt as he takes the money:

> A very red face. Guilt. Grinding the teeth. Soul trying to get out of the mouth, swallowing it back into the body. Shut out the sobs. (Donleavy, *GM* 68)

It is the combination of this sporadic moral sense and his frequent awareness of the desolation that his exuberance maintains in uneasy abeyance that ultimately prevents him from being the "beast" that many of the novel's characters see in him.

Sebastian's exuberance is infectious and communicates itself to the reader in such a way as to render *The Ginger Man* a more joyous and vital book than any of the subsequent novels. Sebastian lives for "the odd moments of joy", but it is not this that differentiates him from the later heroes; it is rather the energy with which he seeks and embraces the "odd moments" – he is the most srestless of all Donleavy's heroes.

The exuberance, the constant movement, the mercurial elusiveness of Sebastian are most effectively conveyed in the novel's style, which is defined by Ihab Hassan in these terms:

> Much of the book is written in the stream of consciousness method, abrupt transitions from past memories to current scenes, disconnected or fragmentary sentences and dangling present participles intended to convey with some immediacy the states of Dangerfield' s mind, his acute isolation. The point of view shifts, within the same paragraph, from the first to the third person, as if Dangerfield could find no way to acknowledge the objective existence of other human beings, as if reality were entirely subjective, to be rendered entirely in elliptic reflections or fleeting sensations, and all action were illusory, to be rendered in perfunctory fashion by a third person. (Hassan 1961. 199)

As well as reflecting the elusiveness and restlessness of Sebastian's existence, the style changes to reflect the moments of stillness. The fragments come together to shape sentences where subject and object maintain a more conventional and static relationship. For Sebastian it is the moment of orgasm that provides such stillness:

> Chris's willowy fingers dug into his thighs and hers closed over his ears and he stopped hearing the soup sound of her mouth and felt the brief pain of her teeth nipping the drawn foreskin and the throb of his groin pumping the teeming fluid into her throat, stopping her gentle voice and dripping from her chords that sang the music of her lonely heart. Her hair lay athwart in clean strands on his body and for the next minute he was the sanest man on earth, bled of his seed, rid of his mind. (Donleavy, *GM* 96)

It is the cruel irony of his predicament that this silence and stillness should both fill the crater around whose crumbling perimeter he is perpetually fleeing and, at the same time, provide the aim which he holds constantly in view:

> All I want now is peace. Just peace. Don't want to be watched and trailed. (Donleavy, *GM* 263)

These moments of stillness represent a kind of death – the only absolute that Sebastian acknowledges:

> The world's silent. Crops have stopped growing. Now they grow again. (Donleavy, *GM* 58)

This is an essential ambivalence; what Sebastian values most is life and yet he longs for the peacefulness of death. At his most joyous he is closest to the desolation and loneliness that underpin his existence, when he his poor he yearns not to have to worry about money. The conclusion of the novel underlines the hopelessness of his position. Percy Clocklan in his newfound wealth provides him with friendship and a seemingly limitless source of money, and he has found for the first time, in Mary, a

woman who can match his own vitality. However, the sudden materialisation of this idyll only serves to plunge him into despair. He walks on Christmas morning around London, "the city suffering from emptiness," his mind occupied in an apocalyptic vision of wild horses running on a country road:

> And I said they are running out to death which is with some soul and their eyes are mad and teeth out. (Donleavy, *GM* 347)

This is the inevitable despair of the man who strives through action to realise the stuff of his fantasies. For Sebastian Dangerfield, "the lovely young girl with long golden hair" will always turn round to reveal the face of "an old toothless hag" (Donleavy, *GM* 343).

After his first novel, J.P. Donleavy became increasingly interested in exploring the predicament of the passive man, he who is acted upon rather than acting himself. The predicament, however, is shown ultimately to be the same; *The Ginger Man* and *The Onion Eaters* (1973) are seen as opposite sides of the same coin, a coin whose sides embrace nothing. In between these novels are three others, of which the central one, the novella, *The Saddest Summer of Samuel S* (1966), is the most important. It is a beautifully written work, tightly and economically controlled, displaying a poetic acuteness of perception in the carefully selected images around which it is formed, and is perhaps one of the least flawed of all Donleavy's novels. Although it is undeniably marked by ambiguity this is not an adverse criticism since a certain element of ambiguity is central to all Donleavy's fiction.

It is helpful to compare the novel with John Barth's *The End of the Road* (1958). In that novel the hero, Jacob Horner, is under treatment with a psychiatrist of rather dubious merit for his 'cosmopsis', a cosmic view of things accompanied by total immobility as the sufferer confronts the void. Barth's novel is a kind of existential joke based on the premise that a man exists and is defined by the choices that he makes – a man must act. In an existential world complete stasis is impossible since it is tantamount to death, a loss of essence proportionate to the amount of time a man spends not choosing, not acting. Although the situation of Samuel S is not identical to that of Jacob Horner, it has similarities. He is certainly poles apart from the Nietzschian Anti-Christ, the Dionysus, that Dangerfield represents. Samuel S is unable to dance at the edge of the crater because he is too overwhelmed by the ineffable sadness and loneliness of his position; like Jacob Horner, he is immobilised by his condition. He is, likewise, treated by a psychiatrist of questionable efficacy, a man who, supposedly dedicated to the creation of a balanced society, invests all his money in "contraception and munitions".

Where Dangerfield is incessantly active, Samuel S represents the passive partners upon whom Dangerfield acts. Samuel S is the first character in Donleavy to refuse the offer of a woman's body; he envisages happiness residing only in the security and warmth of a wife and family, rather than in the transience of a casual lay. In fact, he wishes to return to the womb, where he would be comfortingly enclosed and not "standing alone

in the middle of a great big zero" (Donleavy, *SSSS* 39). In his self-pity there are times when he feels that:

> … one had to give oneself a big bear hug of sympathy. When no one else will ever wrap arms around you like a mother. (Donleavy, *SSSS* 82).

In *The Saddest Summer of Samuel S* Donleavy is closely rescrutinising the anarchic passion by which Dangerfield guides his life and, at the same time, examining the alternatives to that way of life. His conclusions, if he draws any at all, are no less pessimistic. According to W.D. Sherman:

> He finds that the decision to live life passionately and to affirm isolation as a lifestyle is the only possible choice a man can make if he is to remain totally free from manipulation. But he also finds that to live this kind of life leads a man to the brink of unbearable loneliness and despair. Samuel S is the most "human" of all Donleavy's heroes. He is the only one who even considers the possibility of accommodation to society as an alternative to a fully anarchic life. But ultimately, |Samuel S rejects that possibility. (Sherman 216).

The direction in which Samuel S finally moves, at the end of the novel, is as ambiguous as Dangerfield's position at the end of *The Ginger Man*. As in the earlier novel, the conclusion is an apocalyptic and pessimistic vision. Samuel S is alone in Vienna's summer streets:

> On the street all bravery dying in the chill of the summer rain landing on the heart … Shoulders folded like wings and clutching his face with hands as he lay against the corner of a doorway. Dream untold … And … he was crushed up against the train's wheels. And then he was dying and you think that you don't want your friends to know you died screaming in pain but that you were brave, kept your mouth shut and said nothing at all.
>
> Like
> A summer fly
> Waltzes out
> And wobbles
> In the winter. (Donleavy, *SSSS* 121)

The ambiguity is intentional; does Samuel S commit suicide or, like Sebastian, merely sink into a depressed death-dream? It is hard to believe that a character who had wanted to "end up just being alive, the only thing that matters at all" (Donleavy, *SSSS*, 66), could ever commit suicide, but the ambiguity reminds us of the core of Donleavy's vision, the sense of life's ephemerality, its closeness to the void of death and stillness.

If Samuel S is a passive character then Clementine Claw Cleaver of the Three Glands, the hero of *The Onion Eaters* (1971), is yet more so. Donleavy's early fiction depicted a series of characters less and less equipped to confront the void, whose posture is increasingly that of instruments rather than agents. Before examining Clementine himself, it will be helpful to look at some of the associations of the title. The eponymous onion eaters are three mad scientists who descend on Clementine on his very first night at Charnel Castle and proceed to "sponge, steal, cheat (him) and nearly burn the place down," (Donleavy, *OE* 253). Not only do they eat raw onions as their staple diet and pollute the castle with their foul breath, but there is a sense in which they also eat Clementine himself, in that they destroy the materialistic essence of the idyllic existence with which he is so suddenly presented at the beginning of the novel. One is reminded of the scene in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867) in which, divested of his worldly success, Peer is reduced to crawling about the undergrowth looking for wild onions to eat. In a symbolic passage he takes a wild onion and peels away its layers, each layer representing a past stage in his life, in the development of his Self:

> What an incredible number of layers!
> Don't we get to the heart of it soon?
> (He pulls the whole onion to pieces.)
> No, I'm damned if we do. Right down to
> the centre there's nothing but layers –
> smaller and smaller …
> Nature is witty! (Ibsen 191)

Clementine also feels himself to be the butt of a huge joke on the part of Nature – where 'Nature' represents all those circumstances that control his position. In this highly symbolist novel Clementine is shown to be part of an order of things that is ultimately absurd. As Percival says just before the final ball:

> … I'd say before the night's over we'll see bottoms up and tops down. Like absurdities are the stuff sir, of great philosophies so too is mixed company the manure for flowering pleasures. (Donleavy, *OE* 275)

Another of the symbolic associations of the onion is, of course, with tears. Gruff Enobarbus in *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606) ascribes his lapses into emotion to the onion – "And I, an ass, am onion-ey'd …" (IV.iii.35); and tears, for Clementine, as for other Donleavy heroes, are an inevitable response to the desolation of existence:

> Some strange sadness took me and I felt tears running down my face. World so lonely. (Donleavy, *OE* 96)

Although Clementine's course through life is passive, as opposed to Sebastian's active one, both characters respond primarily to their awareness of the death and desolation that lie within life's kernel. Clementine adopts his passivity having observed the consequences of his father's Dangerfield-like violence. It is implied that his father was the cause of his mother's early death, which was the moment that he realised most acutely his own insignificance and isolation:

> I stood at the door and watched her pull a white cover over my mother's face. And when the nurse came out she said to me who are you little boy. I said I'm not anyone.
>
> Nor
> Anyone else
> Either
> Who
> Made
> All that
> Sorrow. (Donleavy, *OE* 56)

As a result of this traumatic experience Clementine is unable to adapt to the harsh reality of the business world into which he is thrust and comes himself within a fraction of death at the end of a long "nervous decline." He is still recovering from this decline when he moves into Charnel Castle at the beginning of the novel.

The Onion Eaters is a far gloomier work than *The Ginger Man*, and almost unremittingly nihilistic. Life in Charnel Castle has the atmosphere of a Gothic fantasy; Clementine's arrival is depicted in terms of the Hammer Films Dracula cliché, where the innocent traveller arrives at the remote and awe-inspiring castle. The castle then begins to fill with a motley crew of eccentrics, freaks and lunatics, whose names might have been drawn from a Jacobean satire like Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613). Like Dangerfield's "girl with long golden hair," Clementine's fantasy also assumes nightmare proportions. In his passivity he is the totally helpless victim of the guests who inflict themselves upon him – he is unable to exert the authority to oblige any of them to leave.

Drained of all vitality, Clementine lacks the energy necessary to savour the quality of the moment with the same joyous spontaneity as Sebastian Dangerfield, and his responses come only after some reflection – "Take a little leap I think in the air," (Donleavy, *OE* 73), and he even finds that "sexual ecstasy has no chance in this country with the rain," (Donleavy, *OE* 134). Lacking red corpuscles as he is Clementine is the first of Donleavy's characters to contemplate suicide; unable to dance on the edge of the crater he feels that he might as well throw himself into it. Even so, his plan deferentially prioritises the convenience of others:

> Must not be too early in the voyage to depress everyone for the rest of the trip. (Donleavy, *OE* 252)

Towards the end of the novel he begins to think increasingly about his father's attitude to life, and almost comes to adopt Dangerfield's attitude that the shaken fist represents the only real alternative to death-confronting despair. It seems as though he might accept this alternative after the nihilistic and fantastic ball at the end of the novel, in which an army of insurrection and a hunt, complete with horses and hounds, ride through the darkened castle after all the candles have gone out. The ball is not quite an apocalyptic vision, since the final scene shows Clementine continuing his life the following day in very much the same state of desolation that has assailed him throughout the novel:

> … the novel ends where it began, with Clementine bewildered by a world he cannot change, escape or adapt to. (LeClair 173)

As a novel *The Onion Eaters* is flawed in a number of ways, but it also has certain features that make it one of Donleavy's most intriguing novels. The first of these might be described as its metaphysical significance. One of the most fascinating episodes in the book occurs when Clementine goes to the city, loses all his money, and sets out to walk back to the castle with Bloodmourn. The land in which the castle is situated (probably but not necessarily Ireland) "holds the world's record for loneliness" (Donleavy, *OE* 100) and is described as being "lonely sad and black" (Donleavy, *OE* 111). Through this bleakness we now see the two destitute figures moving haltingly through the half-light:

> Bloodmourn with hands quietly folded across his stomach. Moving along the byway. Tiny lightening steps. Clementine lagging behind. Breaking into a trot, Catching up. Walking briefly at the heels of Bloodmourn. Till he slowly pulled away again. A nervous hurrying figure in the distance. (Donleavy, *OE* 234)

It is an image almost Beckettian in its desolation and absurdity. One is reminded, for instance, of *All That Fall* (1957), with Mr. and Mrs. Rooney walking or, rather, dragging themselves back from the station in the wind and the rain, along the "hellish road." In Mrs. Rooney's words:

> All is still. No living soul in sight … We are alone. There is no one to ask. (Beckett 29)

Hugely different though they are, Beckett and Donleavy share a sense of man's vulnerability, of his being isolated in and perpetually threatened by an all-enveloping void, within which all his attempts to make sense of his predicament are patently absurd.

The second feature of *The Onion Eaters* that is of particular interest here could also be described as a Beckettian quality: both Donleavy and Beckett perceive the void as being best characterised by silence. We have seen how close Clementine is to surrendering himself to the void, and it is important to note in this connection that he speaks less than Donleavy's other central characters. One of the guests at the ball gratefully mentions the fact that Clementine is the first person he has met "who has just stood there listening" (Donleavy, *OE* 278). On his desolate journey Clementine expresses his feeling that the wilderness through which they are travelling is haunted. Bloodmourn replies:

> That is because there are not enough humans to fill the silence. (Donleavy, *OE* 235)

Donleavy's vision in *The Onion Eaters* is profoundly pessimistic; the silent void is overwhelming, and neither the man who dances, like Sebastian, nor he who does not, like Clementine, will ever be able to conquer it as they teeter absurdly on the edge of its crater.

Samuel Beckett serves as a bridge between J.P. Donleavy and Henry Miller. In *The Literature of Silence*, Ihab Hassan argues that, for all their differences, Beckett and Miller share a view of the awful silence at the centre of a desolate universe. In a survey of the post-war American novel Hassan also focuses on what he sees as their shared sense of anguish in relation to the human condition:

> I should like to suggest that the idea of modern outrage – and by outrage I really mean a radical threat to man's nature – is best viewed as a dangerous part of our experience, manifest in literature and outside of it … Whatever we may think of Henry Miller, we can agree that he holds no patent on anguish in contemporary letters. Samuel Beckett, who stands at the other pole from Miller in contemporary literature, shares with him the feeling of human violation, a violation silent and deep. In any case we come closer to the meaning of outrage, as it makes itself available to the literary imagination, when we ponder Lionel Trilling's notion that modern literature puts the very being of man on dark trial. Outrage is indeed the final threat to being, the enforced dissolution of the human form; it is *both* the threat and the response to it. (Hassan 1970. 197)

Hassan's main argument in *The Literature of Silence* is that Miller and Beckett reflect inverse worlds, but at the centre of both of them there lies silence. With this in mind I want to look now at *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and *Sexus* (1949) in order to outline the most significant points of contact between the writing of Miller and that of Donleavy.

As I pointed out above, both *Tropic of Cancer* and *The Ginger Man* take as their central character an American living in exile in Europe. Both works are written from the point of view of the central character and, in both cases, this viewpoint is almost totally self-centred. In the case of Sebastian Dangerfield this point of view does to a

certain extent recognise the significance of other individuals, an awareness that manifests itself in the form of sporadic guilt feelings. However, with Henry Miller, the selfishness is total. Indeed, it is magnified to the point of colossal indifference. While in Paris he takes a job as proof-reader on an American newspaper, which brings him into daily contact with the world's calamities; his callous indifference takes on cosmic proportions:

> They have a wonderful effect on me, these catastrophes which I proofread. Imagine a state of perfect immunity, a charmed existence, a life of absolute security in the midst of poison bacilli. Nothing touches me, neither earthquakes nor explosions nor riots nor famine nor collisions nor wars nor revolutions. I am inoculated against every disease, every calamity, every sorrow and misery. It's the culmination of a life of fortitude. (Miller, *TC* 151)

In "Inside the Whale" (1940), George Orwell was to attack Miller for his passive indifference:

> The passive attitude will come back, and it will be more consciously passive than before. Progress and reaction have both turned out to be swindles. Seemingly there is nothing left but quietism – robbing reality of its terrors by simply submitting to it. Get inside the whale (for you *are*, of course). Give yourself over to the world-process, stop fighting against it or pretending that you control it; simply accept it, endure it, record it. That seems to be the formula that any sensitive novelist is now likely to adopt. (Orwell 526)

Orwell goes on to describe Miller as "a completely negative, unconstructive, amoral writer, a mere Jonah, a passive accepter of evil, a sort of Whitman among the corpses." (Orwell 527)

However, it is important to differentiate between the depressed passivity of Clementine and Samuel S and the joyous discarding of responsibility of Henry Miller. The Henry Miller of *Tropic of Cancer* is passive in the sense that Sebastian Dangerfield would be passive if he lacked any moral sensibility at all. They share the same bubbling, anarchic *joie de vivre*, the same joyous appreciation of the quality of the moment:

> The wine is splashing between my legs, the sun is splashing through the bay window, and inside my veins there is a bubble and splash of a thousand crazy things that commence to gush out of me now pell-mell. (Miller, *TC* 22)

Henry Miller's vitality is closely associated with language: his joy and the anarchic flow of his words are the means by which he keeps the horror of the void at a sufficient distance for him to maintain his passivity:

> You are the sieve through which my anarchy strains, resolves itself into words. Behind the word is chaos. Each word a stripe, a bar, but there are not and never will be enough bars to make the mesh. (Miller, *TC* 18)

Herein lies the fundamental difference between Miller and Dangerfield; they are both aware of the futility of any attempt to keep the silent void at bay, but Miller refuses to allow himself to be worried by this knowledge. W.A. Gordon makes the point well:

> … even when He is describing his own personal experiences and feelings, (he) remains detached and relatively free of his environment. He is what Miller has always said of himself even as a child, at once a part of and totally independent of the life around him. He is gregarious and totally alone. He is Dostoievski's "underground man" who is filled with violence, but he lacks the self-doubts and tortured inner struggle that mark Dostoievski's heroes. (Gordon 85)

This is not to say that he does not feel misery and despair, but Miller's despair arises from specific causes that affect him personally, for instance the desolation in which Mona's departure from Paris leaves him. The prime cause of the Donleavy hero's despair is usually closely related to the sense he has of his loneliness in the void, but the artist in Miller treasures this same sense, and goes so far as to seek it out – but not in the sentimental, self-pitying way in which Balthazar B, for example, indulges himself in the poignancy of loneliness. Miller *chooses* loneliness and rejoices in it:

> It is not difficult to be alone if you are poor and a failure. An artist is always alone – if he *is* an artist. No what the artist needs is *loneliness*. (Miller, *TC* 72)

Ten years after the publication of *Tropic of Cancer* the British critic Cyril Connolly (1903-74) was to echo Miller's sentiments in *The Unquiet Grave* (1944, rev. 1951) when he wrote that the art that is forged from loneliness:

> … possesses the integrity and bleak exhilaration that are to be gained from the absence of an audience and from communion with the primal sources of unconscious life. (Connolly 79)

This is an important point; what ultimately differentiates Miller's worldview from that of a Donleavy hero is that he is an artist, and he sees everything that impinges upon his situation in relation to that fact. As an artist he chooses loneliness and he experiences its "bleak exhilaration", whereas Dangerfield, who runs away from loneliness, experiences only its desolation. Miller's world is "a world without hope, but no despair" (Miller, *TC* 156). As an artist he can confront the void and accept that nothing, apart from art, is of crucial significance in his life:

> I made up my mind that I would hold on to nothing, that I would expect nothing, that henceforth I would live as an animal, a beast of prey, a rover, a plunderer. (Miller, *TC* 104)

Having adopted this attitude to life, Miller can come to terms with death. For him it is not the ambivalent source of terror/ultimate peace envisaged by the Donleavy hero. For Miller the proximity of death to life represents the ultimate source of comedy:

> Behind my words are all those grinning, leering, skulking skulls, some dead and grinning a long time, some grinning as if they had lockjaw, some grinning with the grimace of a grin, the foretaste and aftermath of what is always going on. Clearer than all I see my own grinning skull, see the skeleton dancing in the wind, serpents issuing from the rotted tongue and the bloated pages of ecstasy slimed with excrement. And I join my slime, my excrement, my madness, my ecstasy to the great circuit which flows through the subterranean vaults of the flesh. (Miller, *TC* 255)

When Miller confronts death, in whatever form, he laughs satanically, takes on new life, and kicks his heels in the air with the most innocent joy:

> … my mind reverts to a book that I was reading only the other day. 'The town was a shambles; corpses, mangled by butchers and stripped by plunderers, lay thick in the streets; wolves sneaked from the suburbs to eat them; the black death and other plagues crept in to keep them company, and the English came marching on; the while the *danse macabre* whirled about the tombs in all the cemeteries …' Paris during the days of Charles the Silly! A lovely book! Refreshing, appetizing. I'm still enchanted by it. (Miller, *TC* 48)

Sexus, though written after *Tropic of Cancer*, takes for its subject matter the period of Miller's life before his self-imposed exile, when he was still living in New York. Death still does not represent a terror for Miller, so much so that Ihab Hassan calls it "an American comedy of dead or dying souls" (Hassan 1969. 90). One of the most hilarious passages in the book occurs after Mona has telephoned Miller at his office to inform him of her father's death. Juan Rico, a new employee, convinced that Miller must be sad, accompanies him to a skating rink, and together they roller-skate around and around – Miller himself putting up the most absurd exhilarating performance, describing his emotions thus:

> The thought that never in her life would Mona suspect what I was doing this minute gave me a demonic joy. (Miller, *S* 385)

Although the comic omnipresence of death remains a central concern of Miller's work, it is important to note the change that has occurred in the tone of the vision in the

eleven years separating the two books (the same gap, incidentally, as separates Donleavy's *The Ginger Man* from *The Saddest Summer of Samuel S*). As with Donleavy, there has been a mellowing of the tonal quality of the writing: the anger and the apocalypticism have been largely muted. Miller seems to have become more reconciled to the world, and this reconciliation has been accompanied by a vagueness, a loss of direction. *Sexus* lacks the passion of the earlier book, but this is not to say that it lacks vitality. The book is written as a gesture against the deadness and sterility of mediocrity. In a crucial passage, whose opening salvo is reminiscent of Dangerfield, Miller states his credo:

> *Can you let off a loud fart*? Listen, once I had ordinary brains, ordinary dreams, ordinary desires. I nearly went nuts. I loathe the ordinary. Makes me constipated. *Death* is ordinary – it's what happens to everybody. I refuse to die. I've made up my mind that I'm going to live forever. (Miller, *S* 426)

In this passage lies the essential difference between the visions of Henry Miller and J.P. Donleavy, for Miller's trajectory is increasingly optimistic, just as Donleavy's becomes darker and gloomier.

Both Henry Miller and J.P. Donleavy are novelists of outrage in Ihab Hassan's sense of the term, meaning novelists who write in response to their perception of the existence of a fundamental threat to the very being of man. Despite the significant similarities between the work of the two writers their writing followed divergent paths. In their first novels they shared a remarkably similar anarchic exuberance of spirit, but Donleavy's roguish wit became stilted. The comedy of *The Saddest Summer of Samuel S* and *The Onion Eaters* is laboured – a dark, black humour that serves only to emphasise the desolation that underlies it. The difference between the two authors can best be illustrated by a quotation from *Sexus*, where Henry Miller has set himself up as an analyst and offers this advice for the benefit of all potential patients:

> Lie down, then, on the soft couch which the analyst provides, and try to think up something different … rise up on your own two legs and sing with your own God-given voice. To confess, to whine, to complain, to commiserate, always demands a toll. To sing it doesn't cost you a penny … *But*, you quibble, how can I sing when the whole world is crumbling, when all about me is bathed in blood and tears? Do you realise that the martyrs sang when they were being burned at the stake? … They sang because they were full of faith … Between the planes and spheres of existence, terrestrial and superterrestrial, there are ladders and lattices. The one who mounts sings. He is made drunk and exalted by unfolding vistas. He ascends sure-footedly, thinking not of what lies below, should he slip and lose his grasp, but of what lies ahead. *Everything lies ahead* … To move forward clinging to the past is like dragging a ball and chain. The prisoner is not the one who has committed a crime, but the one who clings to his

> crime and lives it over and over. We are all guilty of crime, the great crime of not living life to the full. (Henry Miller, *S* 311-13)

Henry Miller could be speaking directly to any of Donleavy's post-Dangerfield heroes. The life-affirming vitality of this passage contrasts directly with *The Saddest Summer of Samuel S*, in which the eponymous hero occupies his weekly sessions of psychoanalysis bewailing his own predicament and, at the end of the novella, has a vision of his own death or possibly even suicide. In their terror of death Donleavy's heroes fall back increasingly onto their memories of the past, and are correspondingly less able to tolerate life in the present. For Henry Miller, however, death holds no terrors; he is able to contemplate it unflinchingly and laugh heartily at the joke it represents and, for most of the time, laughing and singing in his *danse macabre*, he enjoys life hugely.

Notes

1 http://www.jpdonleavycompendium.org/irish_top_100.html

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